



A HISTORY OF THE IRONBOUND CHILDREN'S CENTER

by
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I N T R O D U C T I O N

I have set out to write a limited history of the Ironbound Children's Center. Much of what has been written up to this point is contained in descriptions written for funding purposes, and they paint a somewhat incomplete picture. I hope to describe more fully the process of building a neighborhood institution, pointing out some of the obstacles and some of the mistakes, in addition to charting the progress that's been made. In particular, I will emphasize the interaction among parents and organizers and the evolution of a group of parents who have assumed a major role in governing and operating the Center.

Since my "history" is limited to selected topics, I haven't said very much about the growth and development of the Center's educational programs and/or efforts to train young people as teaching assistants. Only in certain instances have I stressed the role of individual organizers, teachers, or parents. Consequently, there are many persons who have been an integral part of the Center's work who haven't been properly recognized.

I hope that a more comprehensive study of the Ironbound project will tell about the substance of their work.

I

B E G I N N I N G S

On April 17, 1969, a group of parents, teachers, and "organizers" met at St. Stephen's Church, Newark, to discuss the idea of having a summer program for children. It was a difficult meeting; many of the parents didn't know one another and none of them had any real knowledge of program possibilities. The teachers and organizers dominated the discussion. We didn't accomplish much that night, but we all agreed with much enthusiasm to have another meeting to make some decisions.

How did the meeting come about? It was initiated by a group of people who had come to Ironbound several months earlier to live and work and organize community-based programs. Some were experienced community organizers from Newark with definite ideas about what they hoped to accomplish; others were young teachers who chose to work in Ironbound schools. Still others were VISTA volunteers assigned to work with community "self-help" projects in Ironbound.*

It is difficult to state the initial purpose of "organizing" in Ironbound, for there was a lack of consensus about purpose. Broadly

* NOTE: This wasn't the first attempt to meet with parents and plan a course of action. During the winter a few individuals had attempted to create an "Ironbound Education Association" to press for daycare facilities for the neighborhood, but the organization failed for lack of substantial membership and lack of money.

speaking, the organizers wanted to build a constituency for "change", that is, a group of people from a white, working-class neighborhood who would come to see themselves as victimized or oppressed by the dominant political and economic forces within the country. One way to do this would be to create local (neighborhood) institutions that would reflect a different set of political, social, and personal values-- i.e., a democratic and egalitarian spirit, a participatory structure for decision-making, a concern for individual needs and personal development.

The organizers believed that educational issues were a good starting point for talking to people and eliciting their support. Furthermore, many of them had an intrinsic interest in the field of education, and one had helped to create a new community school in Newark's Central Ward. Consequently, some worked as teachers and others started a tutoring service at the neighborhood boys club. We got to know the parents of some of the children, and those parents became involved in the April meetings.

The discussion at St. Stephen's was followed by a meeting at the local board of the anti-poverty agency. We decided (more or less by consensus) to ask the state for funds for a limited summer program of recreation and tutoring. Two of the organizers would write a proposal and submit it to the group for approval.

The proposal never was approved in any formal sense. Many of the organizers were simultaneously involved in a primary election, and the work in Ironbound temporarily took a back seat to the campaign. After the election, the proposal outline was rewritten and greatly expanded and sent to Trenton for approval by the State Department of Community Affairs, (DCA). The expanded proposal was then discussed with some parents on an individual basis.

We waited until July for a contract to be ironed out. The Urban Coalition gave us supplementary funds, and we found a suitable location for a program, but the state continued to drag its heels. In late July we held a meeting with ten or twelve parents and drafted a letter of protest to DCA. The letter seemed to produce some results; the contract was awarded during the first week in August.

The program we proposed to undertake was far more ambitious than the one we had sketched out in the meeting room of St. Stephen's Church. Instead of a summer program limited in scope and duration, we ended up with a youth employment and training project that would be "stretched" to provide day care and after-school tutoring assistance. Instead of working to transform existing institutions, we would be totally absorbed in trying to make a new institution work.

P A R E N T I N V O L V E M E N T

August, 1969--the beginning of the Ironbound Children's Center. When our operating grant was finally approved, we found that we had many things to plan and decide before we could begin the program. Our most important decision was: what role would parents have in running the Center? They didn't have a significant role in drafting the proposal and securing funds, and we all felt, with some degree of difference, that parents should immediately have a much greater role. We wanted to establish a governing structure in which parents could participate to insure that they would have some say about policies affecting their children. We also wanted to involve parents in a process of democratic decision-making that would be a new kind of experience for them.

Two distinct planning and decision-making committees were formed: the Personnel Committee and the Program Committee. Both committees were nominally responsible to the general meeting of parents and "project staff" (a label for the teachers and organizers), but they functioned as autonomous groups.

The responsibilities of both committees were generally defined by the role that had been established for parent-staff committees at the

Springfield Avenue Community School. The Personnel Committee would hire the teachers and teacher trainees, evaluate their performance, and, if necessary, dismiss a staff member for not measuring up to work expectations. They could also establish rules or procedures that teachers, trainees and children were expected to follow. The Program Committee's job was to plan program ideas with the head teacher and to approve expenditures for materials and equipment. Parents were encouraged to sign up for one of the committees when they registered their children in either the Pre-School Program (3-5 years) or the After-School Program (6-11 years).

Although we talked to parents about "community control," it certainly could not be said that the parents controlled the committees. While they were a voting majority, they usually went along with the recommendations of the teachers and organizers. The committees were essentially a learning process for everyone involved: the organizers learned something about the parents' way of thinking, and the parents became more aware of some of the issues involved in planning and operating a program. Yet, some important decisions were made: who to hire and how much to pay them, what materials to buy and how much to spend out of our threadbare budget.

A few parents became involved in other ways. Most of the fathers weren't inclined to go to meetings (planning a child's education is generally seen as a woman's responsibility in Ironbound), but a few

helped out with the important task of remodeling the building. Two or three fathers helped build shelves and bookcases, and another partitioned the bathrooms. Unfortunately, we weren't able to find a way to sustain this kind of involvement.

Two observations should be made. One, there was no real pressure for us to live up to the rhetoric of "community control," for no one really understood (at that point) what it was all about. The sense of struggle against existing authority that characterizes community politics in black neighborhoods wasn't present in Ironbound. (Imperiale's citizens' committees weren't challenging the authority of government officials, but rather what they saw as a constant 'pandering' to black 'extremists').

Furthermore, none of the organizers believed in "community control" as an immediate goal. In a neighborhood which (as a whole) firmly resists changing patterns of life, we weren't willing to risk certain goals, i.e., creating a racially integrated program, introducing new concepts in education, etc. We felt that our ideas offered people the possibility of changes that would benefit them, and we didn't want to be constantly harassed or threatened by hostile groups in presenting those ideas.

P A R E N T -- T E A C H E R R E L A T I O N S H I P S

While decision making through governing committees was our primary goal for parent involvement, we also felt it was important to discuss children's individual needs and how they might best be met.

The idea that parents should share in a learning relationship with the teacher and the child is hardly a revolutionary concept. Yet, while many have paid lip service to the idea, few have labored to make it work. An occasional home visit or a "conference" with the parent is normally the extent to which that relationship would develop. "Teachers don't have the time," "parents aren't willing," and so forth.

In those instances where a teacher has sought out a parent (or vice-versa), it is usually the result of encountering some difficulty with the child: a "behavior problem," a lack of attentiveness, perhaps, a problem with a particular subject. The parent-teacher encounter turns out to be a one-way affair with the teacher frequently offering advice on "improving the home environment." (The idea of the parent criticizing the classroom environment is out of the question.)

It seems to me that this kind of parent-teacher encounter only serves to reinforce preconceptions held by both parties. The parent, who

usually feels some deference to the teacher's "professional" knowledge and status, is likely to feel even more inadequate when the teacher suggests that her child's problems may somehow relate to the home environment. The teacher, who probably feels a sense of accomplishment from his/her visit (and who probably found some evidence to confirm his idea of where the problem lies) is now even less able to overcome the barriers imposed by the "professional-client" relationship.

We were committed to a different concept of parent and teacher relating to benefit the child. It included a desire to know the parent as an individual and to encourage him or her to speak freely and, for our part, to be less pretentious about our own abilities, (some of us couldn't afford to be too pretentious, anyhow!), and accordingly, to invite some criticism from the parent. We also believed that the child had a right to some say and that he or she should be party to some of our discussions with the parent. (On the latter point, we weren't at all sure of what we really wanted, so our definition of the child's role tended to be quite ambiguous).

Few parents who became involved in the children's center really questioned the legitimacy of the organizers. We came in and set up a program with a minimum of community involvement--but that's how all the "agencies" got started! There was some talk of us being Communists or trouble-makers, and we quickly made some enemies within the neighborhood; but

parents who began to work with us generally felt the Center was a good thing. We were able to survive a petition to close down the Center and a contrived racial incident without losing the confidence of most parents.

STAYING AFLOAT

Whatever our organizing ambitions may have been, our biggest challenge during the first few months was simply keeping the programs going. Our nominal sponsoring agency, the North Jersey Community Union, decided to use some of our contract funds for other purposes. The Department of Community Affairs turned a deaf ear to our complaints, and we were left without funds to hire a director. In addition, there was a critical shortage of teaching staff--and many young teaching assistants to train. Seeking program guidance and training expertise we called upon the Early Childhood Learning and Development Center of the New Jersey State Department of Education. This Center is located at the Springfield Avenue Community School.

The L&D staff weren't strangers to us; Derek Winans knew them through his involvement with the school, and we had called upon the director, Joe McSweeney, to help obtain our operating funds. After spelling out our needs, the L&D staff put together an elementary training program for our trainees and provided us with an administrative consultant to help us work out our organizational difficulties. The training was a big boost for the staff, and one of the trainers, Esta Diamond, was hired as director by the Personnel Committee. Equally significant was the beginnings of a working partnership with the L&D staff--a relationship that would greatly affect the future direction of the Children's Center project.

The early months were an active period for the Personnel Committee. In addition to hiring staff trainees and a director, the committee also had to consider parent complaints, staff performances, grievance procedures--in general, the relationship among the parents, the director, and the young adult staff. Since the committee had no precedent to work from, it was often a trying task.

The Program Committee was less organized and less productive. Whereas the Personnel group dealt primarily with concrete situations, the Program Committee had more general topics to consider: what the main emphasis of the program should be, what kinds of activities were "educational," and so forth. Where the discussion was more specific, it centered on more mundane "business," such as how much to spend on various kinds of materials. The Program Committee organizers soon discovered that they weren't very good at leading discussions about educational "issues." A more structured informative meeting probably would have been more interesting to parents than our unstructured sessions in which we often failed to generate any group discussion.

We fell far short of our own expectations in establishing parent-teacher relationships. Aside from meetings and occasional chats, we weren't able to spend much time with parents. There was rarely a time when anyone could be spared from working in the pre-school or after-school programs, and we seldom had very much energy left come evening. In those instances where one of us did become involved with a family, we

ended up trying to relate not only to the children's needs, but to the parent's needs and aspirations¹, a rewarding experience for each of us, but time-consuming as well.

We did send a questionnaire to parents during the Christmas holidays to find out their opinion of the Center's programs, their thoughts on the quality of education in the local public schools, and their receptivity to the concept of community action as a way of promoting change. (There was general approval of the Children's Center, a passive acceptance of the schools, and apparently no great interest in--or understanding of--community action). Additionally, the young adult teachers-in-training visited some parents to learn more about the children who came to the Center.

In general, our first months were hectic, yet encouraging. The Personnel Committee was functioning quite well, and the programs were settling down. Yet, it seemed as though we didn't have enough time to do anything quite as thoroughly as we should have; we needed more program planning, better training, more organized meetings, more communication with parents. We began to wonder if we had taken on more than we could handle.

¹ As time went on, our own needs, feelings, etc. became more a part of these relationships.

S P R I N G -- 1 9 7 0

Despite a critical shortage of staff and money, the Center somehow made it through the first winter. In fact, we were able to improve and expand the program somewhat, and we added a number of new families to the Center's roster. Most of the Center's progress in this period should be attributed to the skill and energy of the Center's director, Esta Diamond. Her ability to put together a program and capture a child's interest far outstripped the ability of other project workers, and her presence gave us some legitimacy as "educators."

Three organizers--David Miller, Lynn Rogers, and Walt Park-- left the project during the winter. They had grown weary of living in Newark and disenchanted with some of their co-workers. They felt that as a group the organizers weren't being very open with one another and they were disturbed by Derek's tendency to dominate "collective" decision making. David, Lynn, and Walt all felt alienated from what they saw as the failure of the Children's Center organizers to live up to their own standards in relating to parents and to one another. (This was a conflict that would re-emerge during the months to come).

We also added new project members: three VISTA volunteers (Jim Keese, Thom Peplinski, and Ray Lebov) and an assistant director, David Toler. Joanna Andros, who had helped to get the Center off the ground during

the previous summer, joined the staff as a teacher and organizer.¹ As we attempted to re-define our goals with the new project members, we felt a renewed enthusiasm and sense of purpose. We made plans to expand our pre-school program and talked hopefully of having a kindergarten-first grade classroom in September.

Planning an expanded program was seen as a means of re-involving parents as decision makers. Attendance at parent meetings had been on the wane for three or four months--probably because few matters of substance were being dealt with at meetings. Accordingly, we called a general parents' meeting in April and formed parent-staff committees to plan next year's pre-school, after-school, and young adult programs. Each committee would make recommendations to the general meeting, and a proposal would be written based upon decisions made at that meeting. We also recommended that the Personnel Committee hire a parent coordinator to visit parents, organize meetings and, in general, give the parents a more effective voice in day-to-day decisions.

As a result of these changes, parents did become more involved in the Center. The planning committees were quite active, and a number of decisions were made. In the area of finances, parents rejected the idea of sliding scale payments (based upon ability to pay) in favor of

¹ Hiring David and Joanna was made possible by a supplementary grant from Seton Hall University.

a firm demand for free day care for all parents,¹ (or a small fee for everyone if that didn't come through). The general meeting also approved the idea of comprehensive day care including medical and dental care, a psychiatric and counseling service, and a hot meal program.

While the planning sessions produced little in the way of novel day-care concepts, they served as a forum at which parents could express themselves and could learn something about the possibilities afforded by a comprehensive day-care program. The meetings also served to generate enthusiasm for a community school. A number of parents and organizers visited two or three community schools in the area to find out how they's come into being. The possibility of hooking up with the Board of Education was introduced, and some preliminary discussions were held with the Superintendent of Schools. Additionally, some parents, young adults, and project staff went to an alternative school's "festival" in Toronto to find out what people were doing in other areas.

All in all, it was a time of moving ahead for the Children's Center project. The program was holding together, the staff trainees were learning how to teach, and we had succeeded in moving to a new level of parent involvement. To be sure, there were some real needs: a new contract, new people who could bring needed teaching and organizing skills, and more activity in the neighborhood, but all these things seemed within our reach. Spring had brought a renewed optimism to the Children's Center.

¹ Since we weren't technically a day care center, we had been able to establish free day care from the outset of the program.

S E T B A C K

The spring of 1970 also produced one of the most bitter and divisive political campaigns in Newark's history. Out of the seven-man field in the May voting, two candidates emerged--Hugh Addonizio, the incumbent mayor, and Kenneth Gibson, the first black candidate to seriously challenge for the mayoralty. During the campaign Addonizio and seven others were being tried on charges of conspiracy and extortion, a situation which Gibson supporters naturally sought to exploit. Addonizio, on the other hand, charged that Gibson was a tool of "militant extremist" who sought to drive whites out of the city. The city's mood was ugly, it's residents torn apart by fear and hatred.

The Children's Center project staff and several parents supported Gibson, though we were among the only people in Ironbound to openly do so. Four or five of us became actively involved in the campaign, and thus the Children's Center was identified in the minds of neighborhood residents as an organization that supported Gibson.

Gibson won the election and, in fact, received a substantial number of votes in Ironbound. We had helped to elect a mayor who would be sympathetic to the Children's Center project, and thus it seemed worth all the hassles and all the risks.

What we didn't expect was that the intensity of the backlash feeling in Ironbound would be directed against the Children's Center. The day after the election our files were ransacked, and a small group of parents held a secret meeting with members of the police department who were hostile to us. Rumors were circulated, and an angry group of parents demanded a showdown meeting with the organizers.

About sixty persons showed up at the meeting — our largest meeting ever. A large number of people (many of whom were not involved in the Center) were openly hostile, while other parents wanted to see what the whole thing was all about. The "organizers" of the meeting made a number of charges: that we had "mixed education and politics"; that we had used the Center's office for political purposes and had diverted Children's Center funds for such purposes; finally, that we were part of a "Communist conspiracy".

The evening was long and bitter, with charges and counter-charges being exchanged and explanations being offered. It was true that the office was used for campaign work, though it was by no means an election "storefront". We did satisfy most people that no Children's Center funds were spent for campaign purposes. The "Communist" charges, which amounted to some hearsay "guilt by association", were dropped for lack of substance.

By the end of the meeting, it was clear that the children's center wouldn't be closed down by a group of persons who were bitter about Addonizio's defeat. Indeed, most parents rallied to our defense. Yet, it is also clear that many people had less trust in us as a result of that meeting. Parents who had been told that the center was 'their' center discovered that we had made decisions without giving them any say in the matter.

In retrospect, it seems clear that we took a number of unnecessary risks in working for Gibson's election. We shouldn't have used the office for campaign work, and perhaps we should have maintained a lower profile during the campaign. (though we all felt that Gibson's election was necessary for our survival). Moreover, we should have made the use of the office an open issue with parents. Our behavior was inconsistent with our professed ideas about what things parents had a right to decide.

The fall-out from the elections was inevitable in some ways. Most Italians took the election results as a slap-in- the face to their ethnic heritage. Yet, in addition to further antagonizing a number of persons who really didn't share in the Center's goals, we also alienated some parents who had cared a great deal for the center and who had worked to make it an accepted community institution.

NEW POSSIBILITIES

As a result of the post-election backlash directed at the children's center, the staff was determined to work a little harder in the months ahead. We planned a summer day camp, printed booklets advertising the program, and recruited many new children. Two part-time parent co-ordinators, hired by a re-grouped Personnel Committee,¹ worked to establish better day- to day contact with other parents.

Plans to expand the children's center influence in the neighborhood went ahead full force. Proposals for a pediatric health clinic and a 'media center'² were submitted to Model Cities, and a new location for expanded day care facilities was sought. In our budget proposal for summer recreation funds (from the Urban Coalition), we outlined plans for concerts in Independence Park and 'block parties' in various Ironbound neighborhoods.

These plans were made in anticipation of new funds and a large influx of new people, mostly VISTA'S to handle the increased work load. Derek, in particular, felt that the children's center and the organizers had to make their presence felt in new and expanded ways if we were to be taken seriously as a force for change in the neighborhood. Others among the group felt that we were biting off more than we could chew.

As the summer progressed, things didn't fall into plan exactly as we had hoped. In Trenton, the Department of Community Affairs told us

¹ Three members resigned after the election controversy.

² For making and screening films and training teen-agers in media techniques

that all of the day care money earmarked for Newark had been allocated, and we weren't going to be one of the lucky groups. They disavowed any knowledge of prior commitments to us, and overlooked any of the objective criteris by which we might well have qualified. Our plans for a school were very nice, they said, but what could they do about it? The Parents were perplexed; as we had been confident that the money was ours. Now, it didn't look quite so easy.

A large group of VISTA'S arrived in August, and after a brief orientation period, they were given the choice of working with either the children's center or the Ironbound Youth Project. The latter group, which included three former NCUP¹ organizers, two teachers, and three VISTA 'community' volunteers, planned to open a neighborhood center for teen-agers and young adults.

Though ostensibly working towards similar ends, there was considerable friction between some children's center organizers and persons working with the Youth Project. To begin with, there were unresolved personal conflicts between individual organizers, and these conflicts colored much of the discussion that went on among members of the two groups. Additionally, both groups were protective of what each believed to be 'their' constituency; the children's center dealt primarily with young children and their parents (and a few teen-agers), while the Youth Project planned to work with teen-agers and younger adults.

¹ The Newark Community Union Project (NCUP) was organized in the South Ward (Clinton Hill) in late 1964. It's activity focused on housing, welfare rights; and other community issues.

The two 'projects' also claimed to have different philosophies about organizing people. The distinction was crudely labelled 'program' (Children's Center) versus 'protest'. (Youth Project),¹ but the distinction was more along the lines of what each group hoped to accomplish with its respective program. The Children's Center organizers were attempting to create 'parallel' institutions which would demonstrate alternative values; Youth Project members by demonstrating alternative values, hoped to identify young people who felt alienated from their life-experience in Ironbound and who would actively seek to change conditions in the neighborhood.

Despite these differences, the most crucial obstacle to cooperation was lack of trust. The two groups married an uneasy truce during the last few weeks of the summer and co-sponsored a series of rock concerts in Independence Park, but both parties balked the idea of joint accountability (or the conditions under which common accountability be realized). Without mutual trust and responsibility, cooperation became a dead issue.

One could give a fuller explanation of the conflict, but I doubt it would make the situation any clearer. What is significant, I think is the confusion and uneasiness among co-workers that resulted from the conflict. Both groups were internally divided on the question of how much to cooperate; how much to trust or distrust. It was a parti-

cularly agonizing situation for the new VISTA'S (who hadn't been here long enough to understand all the factors involved) and for those individuals who had initially sought some co-operation between the Children's Center and the Youth Project. As the months passed, the internal tension would increase, and it would prevent all of us from concentrating on our respective work.

DOWN ----- BUT NOT OUT

By the end of September, our chances of getting a day care contract seemed bleak. Mrs. Jean Starks, State Day Care Director, held firm to her earlier statement that there would be no money for Ironbound. The State Department of Education, the Urban Coalition, Mt. Carmel Guild,¹ and Seton Hall University all wrote letters in support of our proposal, but to no avail. Community Affairs Commissioner , Hume refused to budge.

Our supplemental funds had expired, so we turned to the State Department of Education for help. The department authorized thru Early Childhood L & D Center to provide us with emergency funds pending some final resolution of the day care situation.²

The emergency grant covered only very basic operating costs and left no money for materials, furnishings, and daily maintenance. Thus, despite hard work, new staff training programs at the L & D Center, and some new activities, the quality of the pre-school and after-school programs began to deteriorate.

Time was running out, and we had to decide how to keep the programs going. An emergency parents' meeting was held, and the parents decided that we should go to Trenton and confront Commissioner Hume with some hard questions.

1 Who provided us with diagnostic and counseling services.

2 Although all of the state's day care money was 'gone', none of it had actually been spent.

The trip did not come off as planned. Both Derek and the L & D Staff felt that we should try to work "through channels" a little longer, and the parents reluctantly complied. Dissension, frustration over the day care mess, and the absence of well-defined work roles all contributed to our sinking spirits.

We attempted to resolve our differences through an extended discussion of our differing points of view, but these meetings failed to boost our collective morale.

In attempting to reach a consensus about abstract issues, we ended up doubting our ability to work together." Is the Children's Center worth the effort?" became a question in the minds of some organizers and the Department of Education

The answer came very close to being "no", "Why not close the center for six months, do some long-range planning, and then start up again"? "It was argued, besides, the "Teen Center" is bound to get us into trouble, so we might as well lay low for awhile".

This alternative plan almost won out, but when some parents found out what was brewing, they let it be known that the Children's Center was worth it- to them. They conveyed their feelings to Joe McSweeney, and he became convinced that there was, indeed, a small group of parents who were willing to fight to keep the Center open.

Additional emergency funds were authorized.

A joint meeting of parents and project staff again decided to take their day care plea to Commissioner Hume's office.¹ The Commissioner refused to give us an appointment,--- so we sent him a telegram informing him that we were coming to see him just the same.

Arriving at the Department of Community Affairs, we² marched---- forty- strong-- into the lobby and told the receptionist that we'd come to see the Commissioner. When she replied that he "wasn't available", we began chanting "We want Hume" and "Save our Center".

Now, the Department of Community Affairs wasn't used to having parents demonstrating in the lobby, and they didn't know quite what to do. After a long wait, we were informed that the Deputy Commissioner would meet with eight spokesmen-- and our eight youngest 'spokesmen' (ranging in age from four to twelve) went upstairs to meet him. If they were going to play games with us, well, why not reciprocate?

Our parent group followed the children upstairs. If there was any doubt about their desire to keep the Center open, they dispelled that doubt on December 4th. In direct, personal, emotional language they told what the center meant to them and to their children, and they rebuffed every excuse the Deputy Commissioner had to offer.

1 Though most parents were unwilling to go after being thwarted in their initial effort.

2 "We" means parents, staff organizers, young adults, and children. This was truly the first time that "we" had really done anything together!

We left the Department of Community Affairs and went to the State House, where we met with an aide to the Governor and presented a petition with over 900 signatures. Once again we demanded to know why our proposal had been turned down, and we were promised a prompt investigation.

Our efforts that day eventually led to a modified day care contract-- though it would be many months in coming. Yet of greater significant was the fact that a small group of parents asserted their right to speak for the Children's Center. The debate over what things the parents had a right to decide was pretty much settled. And they were the ones who did the deciding-- not the organizers.

February, 1971

Despite our apparent success on December 4, we suffered through the next few weeks with no definite word from the Governor's office regarding our sought-after day care contract. Our storefronts continued to deteriorate, and attendance was distressingly low. Accordingly, a small group of parents made a return trip to Trenton in late January. They came back with news of an expected contract with the Department of Institutions and Agencies, so the State Department of Education again authorized additional emergency funds.

Aimed with renewed confidence that the Children's Center would continue to operate, we embarked on a drive to recruit new parents and children. We also set out to restructure our decision-making body. In fact, we had two decision-making groups at that time: a Personnel Committee, (mostly parents) who had begun to assume a larger role in overall decision-making; the Project Staff (meaning all of the adult staff at the Center) who made most decisions about larger policy issues and who generally speaking had much greater access to information than the parent group.

The consensus of opinion among parents, and teachers, and organizers was that parents should share in making decisions formerly made by the project staff, and that there should be a structured body for making these decisions.

Heretofore, the parents' input into major decisions had been largely informal-- the staff organizer would discuss a particular issue with an individual parent in order to obtain some insight into the parent's thinking. Or, conversely, the organizer would attempt to win over the parent to the organizer's point-of-view.

The desire for a joint decision making group was also prompted by a heightened sense of equality between parents and staff member. Now that we had worked together, talked together, and socialized together for several months (or more), we felt a greater sense of shared experiences and common goals.

Accordingly, we scheduled a series of 'Personnel Committee' meeting to discuss ways of setting up a governing board. Doris Norton, our parent co-ordinator wanted only parents to serve on the governing board, while others felt that membership should be open to staff trainees, teachers and organizers (as well as parents). One of the parents, Arlene DaSilva, proposed that the governing board should report back to a general membership meeting on a regularly scheduled basis. The suggested size for the governing group ranged from twelve to eighteen members.

The meetings finally produced a general agreement among Personnel Committee members that we should have a governing board of parents, and 'project staff' members to be chosen at a General Meeting.

The board would have final authority over all children's center policy matters-- personnel, program, community relations, finance, and contracts with state and local agencies. The number of Governing Board members to be chosen was still an open question; Derek proposed that we choose thirteen parents, five young adults, and 'four project staff' (twenty-two members), while others argued that membership should be open to any parent, young adult (staff trainee) or adult staff member who wanted to do the work and would regularly attend the proposed bi-monthly meetings. Also unresolved were issues such as: 'who could be an officer?' and 'how would committees be organized, and what would be their relationship to the board?'

Unfortunately, it wasn't the time for calm deliberation of the various points-of-view. The Newark school strike was well into its second month, and there was a tremendous amount of tension throughout the city. Most black parents and teachers opposed the strike, while a majority of white residents supported the striking teachers 'who were predominantly white' Consequently many schools in black neighborhoods continued to operate fairly 'normally', schools in white neighborhoods were severely crippled.

In Ironbound, the militantly anti-black Ironbound Citizens' Council (I.C.C.) supported the striking teachers out of common contempt for the black-controlled Board of Education. Claiming to speak for the "community", I.C.C. members effectively closed down Ann St. School,'

1 The school is located three blocks from the Children's Center.

by intimidating teachers and children who wanted to continue going to school.

With neighborhood children virtually "locked out" of schools, a number of parents and organizers felt compelled to do something about the situation. Accordingly, we met with representatives of the Board of Education to work out a plan for re-opening the school. We agreed to organize parents to bring their children to the school; the Board agreed to send additional teachers (white) and to provide police protection.

A sizeable number of parents were initially persuaded to bring their children back to school, but only a handful of parents and children came to the Children's Center on the appointed morning.¹ Those who came decided to go ahead with the plan, and the group proceeded on to the school. When they arrived, they discovered that: the teachers had gone into the school without waiting for the parents and children, and that no additional teachers had been sent. A belligerent group of I.C.C. members hickled and obstructed the parents, the police did nothing and most of the mothers took their children back home. Once again all Children's Center became a target for opposition by some segments of the community.

In addition to opposing the striking teachers, we now felt betrayed by the Board of Education. They apparently had no interest in

1. A number of parents reported being threatened; some came anyway.

improving community relations in the Ironbound and no real concern for our children. The parents were angered and disillusioned, the organizers frustrated and feeling guilty about leading the parents into such an uncomfortable mess. With 20-20 hindsight, some project members bitterly criticized the leaders of the Ann St. group for having gone ahead with the plan despite some now obvious danger signals.

Adding to the existing tension among parents and staff regarding the Youth Project's 'teen center' (which the Ironbound Citizens' Committee violently opposed), the anger and frustration over the Ann St. failure produced some hostile exchanges among us. We tried to talk out our differences, but the latest series of clashes left a residue of mistrust and bad feelings.¹

Despite all this, we did manage to get the Governing Board off the ground. A basic plan for the board was approved at a general meeting -- and then overturned at the next meeting! We finally approved the 'quota system' for electing members (thirteen parents, five young adults, and four 'project staff'), and the Governing Board was subsequently chosen. Phyllis Jarmolowich, a long-active parent, became the Board's first President.

Our first formal meeting was devoted to drawing up a set of by-laws and procedures. In addition, three parents were hired to work as teacher's assistants in the pre-school, marking the first time that

1 Our lack of success also made us much more defensive about our position in the neighborhood.

neighborhood parents had been hired to work "in the classroom". The meeting was long and difficult, few parents spoke, and the new procedures were strange to everyone. Yet, the Governing Board was potentially a major step towards establishing equal parent participation. The authority of the parents no longer depended ultimately on the willingness of the organizers to let parents have some say. Still, it would be a real challenge to make the Governing Board work, and our hopes for success were tempered by the recognition of our failure to work well together during the last month.

A NEW LEAF?

Despite our troubles there were a number of hopeful signs as we approached another springtime of activity. We now had a formally constituted Governing Board and new pre-school and after-school planning committees, and we initiated a newsletter to be mailed out every three weeks. The Center received an ESEA Title # grant and was also promised a new day care contract!

The most exciting new development was the Parent Seminar program. The parent seminars were designed as a means of talking in a group about various aspects of 'how children learn' and how parents could best relate to this learning process. The staff had wanted to organize a structured discussion group for a long time, but we just didn't have the right person to do it.

After participating in the Children's Center for several months, many parents had a new-found sense of confidence in their ability to make decisions that would provide a better program for their children. With the knowledge that they could contribute to their child's learning, they were eager to gain a fuller understanding of the learning process. Furthermore, there was a growing sense among parents that they wanted their children to have an better alternative to the kind of schooling they themselves had.

1 We began negotiating a contract with the Department of Institutions and Agencies on February 17.

The Seminars, organized and moderated by Tim Parsons, were timely, informative, and stimulating. They included: discussions with psychologists, teachers, parents from community schools, and 'open classroom' experts; visits to other community schools and films of open classroom. Parents and staff talked openly about individual children (and families), the local schools, the problems involved in creating an alternative.

The seminars enabled us to focus on what we could hope to do in the future instead of dwelling on our past mistakes. With continued funding apparently assured, it seemed realistic to talk about starting a community school. Unfortunately, the excitement created by the prospects of a new school drained some much needed energy from our already existing programs. We lacked a director, had two overworked head teachers, and consequently failed once again to create a structure that would enable us to get things done more effectively.

We also had to contend with the never-ending teachers' strike, now entering its fourth month. Organizers from the Ironbound Youth Project¹ established a tutoring program at the Presbyterian Church, and thus our relationship to the Youth Project became an issue once again. Opponents claimed that the 'rival' organizers were encroaching on our constituency and endangering our own credibility in the neighborhood. Supporters (including some parents who sent their children) pointed out that, since the Children's Center wasn't doing anything extra

¹ The 'Teen Center' closed in February due to increasingly violent opposition by the Ironbound Citizen's Council and their own inability to control the use of the Center by habitual drug users.

for the children during the strike, it was a good thing that someone else was. "Besides, who were we to say who had the right to do what?"

Once again, the matter wasn't resolved. It all boiled down to three groups of people: those who wanted to try to work with the Youth Project (or who were at least willing to tolerate them); those who wanted to see them pack up and leave; and a third group of people, mostly parents, who didn't know to whom they should listen.

The physical and mental strain of working long hours and squabbling among ourselves began to take its toll. Many of us were taken ill for a week or more at a time, and Nancy Schneider, our pre-school head teacher, wound up with mononucleiosis. Then, Derek developed a serious leg ailment and had to be hospitalized.

Separated by work and illness, we all became further isolated from one another. Instead of having honest group discussions, we began to share our feelings and our fears mostly with other like-minded people.

It was a difficult situation for all of us-- particularly those parents in positions of leadership, who saw the people on whom they relied for guidance and support badly divided and seemingly incapable of resolving the impasse. They became seriously concerned about the future of the center, and felt they had to prevent the conflict from doing irreparable damage to the institution.

The conflict finally came to a head over the issue of whether or not some members of the staff should volunteer as teaching assistants in a local elementary school. (After the teacher's strike was finally settled, the Board of Education sought extra personnel to go into the schools and help the children 'make up for lost time') Some members of the Youth Project had already decided to work as tutors.

I was among the persons who wanted to go into the schools. Although I had just been appointed Acting Director of the Children's Center, I still felt that it was important for me to spend some of my time "out in the neighborhood", and I thought that this was perhaps a good way to do this. Furthermore, I liked the Youth Project people who planned to work in the school, and I thought something good might come of the association.

An otherwise dull Governing Board meeting quickly heated up as I presented my ideas. For one thing, most people had become very conservative about being 'visible' in the neighborhood after the Ann St episode, and they were fearful that our presence in the school would stir up controversy. But, above all, our reasons for wanting to work in the school had been badly misconstrued by persons who were very worried about the future of the center and who had become intensely fearful of any kind of association with the Youth Project organizers.

At this point, it didn't really matter who was right and who was wrong. The whole issue had become so emotionally charged that it was pointless to go on arguing the matter. We had become distant untrusting and uncommunicative, and this, more than any other kind of 'threat' was jeopardizing the future of the Center.

It was time for a change.

GETTING STRAIGHT

By the end of June, three of the Children's Center organizers had departed: Derek Winans, who had been the central figure in the history of the center; Michael Crescenjo, who was perhaps the strongest advocate of community control (and who also worked with the Youth Project), and myself. We were among the people most involved in the dispute over the Youth Project, and our leaving was directly or indirectly the result of that prolonged controversy. While our departure left the Center somewhat shorthanded for awhile, it also served to greatly diminish the internal conflict.

Attention could now focus on the Center's most pressing problems; hiring new personnel, including a director, and running the summer program. There was also the matter of the day care contract, which still lacked final approval by the Department of Institutions and Agencies.

Once again, the Education Department's Early Childhood L & D Center provided assistance! Supplementary emergency funds were again authorized to cover basic operating expenses and the cost of equipment and materials for the summer program.

The L & D staff also offered themselves as resource people to help solve administrative difficulties and to provide curriculum guidance.

A newly reorganized Personnel Committee interviewed candidates for Director, Head Teacher, and After-School Program Director, and persons were hired to fill the first two slots. Revised job descriptions and salary schedules were drawn up, and agreed upon. In short, the Center managed to tie up some of the loose ends that had hampered operations for so long.

Organizing the community school was given number one priority however parents and staff were busy inspecting possible locations, screening applicants for head teacher, and writing a proposal to raise money. Other committees were set up to publicize the school and plan its classroom design.

Working on the proposed school created an exciting opportunity for more parents to become involved in planning and decision making. Persons who had shown little interest in the Governing Board found the community school work much more satisfying. Yet, with so much attention focused on the school, parent involvement in other Children's Center programs and committees fell off considerably. Meetings were little publicized and sparsely attended (except for Personnel Committee meetings) and the staff ended up doing most of the planning. After the trying experiences of the last few months, there was seemingly little energy left to do the day-to day work of visiting parents, organizing meetings, and the like.

- 1 Some parents and staff were reluctant to become overly dependent on the State Department of Education (or any other "outside" agency) but saw no other short-term alternative.

After a difficult and tiring summer, September offered some hopeful signs. A building was purchased as the site for the community school; and the Department of Education offered to provide some financial assistance. Additionally, the day care contract was finally approved and funded. The pre-school was filled to capacity, and on September 13, the community school 'classroom' (Kindergarten-first grade) opened its doors. It was another "new beginning"...

POSTSCRIPT: SOME THOUGHTS ON COMMUNITY
CONTROL AND THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL
ADMINISTRATOR

One of the primary goals of the Children's Center project has been the development of an institution that is ultimately controlled by the people it serves. As a philosophic point - of - view, 'community control' affirms the democratic right to share in certain basic decisions affecting one's life; as a political strategy it is seen as an affective means of challenging existing concentrations of power. And, for today's educational policy-makers, decentralization through community control is a pragmatic alternative to a decaying system of urban education.

Many persons have written with passion and understanding about the failure of urban schools; in fact, their message has now become 'old hat' to most educators. Yet, there seems to be a stubborn unwillingness to come to grips with the problem. Lack of money is the primary reason offered, for lack of progress one can't deny that the near-bankruptcy of city schools is a major obstacle to reform. More money could produce new schools, smaller classes. More 'enrichment' programs, perhaps. Yet I doubt that money alone could cure the system.

Alienation, not lack of money, is at the root of the urban school crisis.

Standardized test scores, can't begin to measure the extent to which these schools alienate children and their parents. The children are turned off not only by large, impersonal classes, but by teacher's who often don't relate to the neighborhood's lifestyle and whose value structure is often different from their parents'. The parent feels excluded from any real involvement in the school and thus doesn't feel that he or she can understand and contribute to the child's learning. The schools provide children with new experiences but don't create similar opportunities for parents; this, too, is a source of alienation between parent and child.

Another differentiating factor (previously mentioned) is the 'professional' bearing of the teacher. Once a byword for competence, the rhetoric of 'professionalism' has become a barrier to good interpersonal relations and honest teacher evaluation. It often boils down to nothing more than an excuse for not getting involved with parent and pupil.

The logic of administrative decentralization has almost become self-evident: 'how, it asks, can the central office know what's needed in the local school?' The argument is perhaps over-stated, but overly centralized systems have developed large and cumbersome bureaucracies that can't seem to get things done. If most decisions could be made at the local (school) level, the school's policies could be geared to meet the needs of the parents and children in that neighborhood.

So far, so good. But while decentralization is necessary for change, it is not sufficient. The crucial question is 'now that we've decentralized, who gets to make the decisions?' If teachers and supervisors (including the principal) become the primary decision makers, won't this tend to further alienate parents and children from the school? Would the teachers become any less isolated and their classes any less impersonal? Would the parents have a real role in the school, or would they still be on the outside? Under a teacher - directed system, who would evaluate the teachers?

It seems to me that parent involvement at all levels of decision-making is the only way to reverse the alienation process described above. Real, active parent participation could transform parent-teacher-child relationships and create a renewed sense of the school as a vital community institution.

This was, and is, the goal of the Children's Center, and given all its shortcomings, the Center has provided "a different and unusual experience" for parents. "Rather than an institution which continues the normal narrowing pattern (of life in Ironbound) the Children's Center has been an institution which has had a broadening effect on the scope of adult lives. By getting adults involved with the major experience of a child's life-education, the parents have become aware of and responsive to the needs of their children".¹

1 From a description of the Children's Center written by organizer Michael Crescenzo.

COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS AND THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATOR

The growth of local, self-governing institutions offers educational administrators the opportunity to share in developing alternative educational forms.

Though parents demand an end to false concepts of 'professionalism' and the right to make certain decisions for themselves, they retain great respect for the teacher or administrator who demonstrates competence in his or her work and who acknowledges the ability of informed parents to make educational choices.

Rather than being a decision maker, the administrator becomes a source of information and expertise that helps other people make decisions. Instead of designing a program, the educator provides the resources others need to make their program ideas work. In short, the educational administrator becomes a vital link between community groups, educational research and development, and public policy-makers.

Creating an alternative institution is a process which has a number of identifiable stages. These stages can be measured by various interrelated factors: parent involvement; program sophistication; the degree of structured decision-making; the development of "standard operating procedures" for getting things done. Ideally, these

factors progress at a fairly even rate; i.e. - as parents become more aware of the nature of the learning process, you develop a more sophisticated learning program and a way of implementing the program.

Of course, things don't always work out that way. In the case of the Children's Center, the persistent threat of 'no more money' was a major impediment to an 'even' kind of growth. Our morale slipped, our program faltered, and we had a hard time implementing procedures that would help us to work more effectively. [To be sure, our own resistance to structured decision-making and our failure as organizers to consistently live up to the rhetoric of 'community control' also impaired this process.]

Despite these obstacles, the Ironbound Children's Center did 'grow' as a viable community institution. A major factor in this process was the Center's relationship with the Director and staff of the State Education Department's Early Childhood L & D Center. During each phase of the Center's development, the L & D staff was called upon to provide various kinds of assistance. It might be instructive to compare the role of the L & D Director and staff with the role 'model' for the Educational Administrator outlined earlier.

A SUMMARY OF THE L & D CENTER'S
RELATIONSHIP TO THE IRONBOUND PROJECT.

- I The first six months-getting started
 - A. Planning assistance in developing an orientation program for staff trainees.
 - B. Training for teen-age / young adult teaching assistants in various activity areas--art, ceramics, creative dramatics, photography and science (after-school program).
 - C. Training for pre-school teaching assistants (classroom organization, planning a day's activity, math and language skills).
 - D. Hired a planning consultant to help the Children's Center staff develop operating procedures.
 - E. Helped Children's Center organizers prepare a survey of parent's attitudes.
 - F. Program Equipment and Materials

The Next Six Months

- II Planning for Expansion
 - A. Provided assistance to organizers in writing a comprehensive day care proposal.
 - B. Lobbied with funding agencies in support of the Children's Center.

- C. Helped the Center develop a liason with the Newark Board of Education.
- D. Evaluated results of staff training in order to prepare new training programs.

III The Second Year - Program Support

- A. College credit training programs for pre-school teaching assistants (staff relations, basic skills).
- B. Workshops for teen-agers (after-school program).
- C. Additional equipment and supplies.
- D. Speakers for parent seminars.

IV The Second Year - Dealing with Crisis

- A. October - emergency funds, extensive lobbying on behalf of day care proposal.
- B. November - discussions with organizers; a tentative decision not to continue emergency funding.
- C. December - discussions with parents produce additional emergency funds.
- D. Lobbied within State Department of Education for additional emergency funds.
- E. Developed a working relationship with the Children's Center Governing Board and individual parents (as well as individual staff members).

F. Worked for a closer relationships among the Children's Center, the Newark Board of Education, and the State Department of Education.

The L & D staff defined its relationship to the Children's Center primarily in terms of providing resources, information, and educational expertise at the request of Children's Center teachers and organizers. More recently, it has sought to establish a working relationship through "official" channels - the elected leaders of the Children's Center Governing Board. The L & D Director has also provided valuable assistance as a liason with Newark school officials and state administrators.

The Children's Center's financial difficulties have made the Center increasingly more dependent upon direct assistance from the L & D office. Having had to justify large expenditures from his own budget, the L & D Director became more involved in making decisions about the future of the Children's Center. To his credit, he abandoned tentative plans to discontinue emergency funding after becoming aware of the parents' commitment to keeping the Center open. Yet, some parents and organizers are fearful of becoming too dependent on any one source of support, least they lose the ability to resist changes they feel would not be in the best interests of the Children's Center.

A less dependent relationship¹ would permit the L & D staff to become essentially "resource persons" once again, training staff members, developing curriculum, and evaluating teaching techniques. They could also help to identify other teachers and educators who would be of assistance in these areas. The L & D staff would also be in a much better position to argue for increased co-operation with the Board of Education, since the governing Board would be much less likely to feel "forced" into a working partnership.

1. Recent contract developments may help to bring this about.

LOOKING AHEAD: 'COMMUNITY' PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The community school movement in this country is rapidly spreading. Parents who have become involved in organizing day care centers and tutoring programs are pressing for extensive community participation in the schools. In some cases, when denied real participation in 'traditional' public schools, parents and other community leaders have gone ahead and organized 'private'¹ schools for their children.

A great deal of creative energy goes into these 'alternative' schools, and they attract many talented young people as teachers. By turning their back on parents' demands, school administrators diminish the likelihood of having innovative programs within the framework of the public school system, thereby removing a potential source of creative tension from the system.

An alternative approach would be for the school administrator to work with community institutions to develop a formal relationship between the school and the Board of Education. The parents (and teachers) would be given defacto² control of the school in return for giving the Board nominal representation on the school's governing body and the right to set certain minimal performance standards.

1. Financed through a combination of private and public funds.
2. I say defacto control recognizing that local school board's have a legal mandate to administer all schools within the system.

This is the essence of the working agreement between the Newark Board of Education and the parent board of the Springfield Avenue Community School. Since the school (day care and K-3) doesn't receive all of its operating funds from the Board of Education, it isn't a totally dependent partner in the relationship. Both parties have something to gain from working together and something to lose if they don't.

The success of the Springfield Avenue School Model has made believers out of many school administrators who were skeptical of parents making decisions about personnel and curriculum. Community aides and volunteers have become involved in teaching, and evaluating children in the classroom, and parents have learned how to better relate to their children's needs at home. The same is true (on a somewhat lesser scale) of parents at the Ironbound Children's Center. While some administrators within the public school system may feel threatened by the community school experiment, they must recognize its potential for benefitting children, their parents, and the entire neighborhood. This, it seems to me, is sufficient reason for putting aside one's fears and finding new ways to assist community groups in planning educational alternatives.

